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SUBJECT: IWAKUNI REFERENDUM WILL NOT IMPACT AIRCRAFT
CARRIER WING RELOCATION

Classified By: AMBASSADOR J. THOMAS SCHIEFFER FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

11. (C) Summary. Eighty-nine percent of participating voters opposed the relocation of the aircraft carrier wing to Iwakuni, in an Iwakuni City referendum held on March 12. However, Defense Minister Nukaga made it clear the same day that the proposed plan "must be implemented." Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe told the press that Japan will reach agreement

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with the U.S."regardless of local opposition." The Iwakuni referendum is not binding on the central government, and Japanese officials have assured us that the bilateral agreements reached in the ATARA Report will be implemented. Embassy Tokyo believes the Iwakuni City referendum is the result of the upcoming consolidation of Iwakuni City with adjacent municipalities. Other mayors are unlikely to hold referendums -- because if they are later "forced" to accept the realignment plans in the face of clear public opposition, they may feel obliged to resign. End Summary.

12. (SBU) An overwhelming majority of Iwakuni City voters opposed the relocation of the 57-strong aircraft carrier wing from Atsugi to Iwakuni under the ATARA agreement, in a referendum held on March 12. 43,433 voters (89 percent of the vote) opposed the relocation while 5,369 (11 percent of the vote) were in favor. Out of 84,659 eligible voters, 58.68 percent of voters turned out -- several percentage points higher than the minimum 50 percent voter turnout required under local regulations for a referendum to be valid.

13. (C) The Japan Defense Agency provided an Embassy Tokyo political officer with JDA head Nukaga's official March 12 comments on the Iwakuni Referendum, in which Nukaga made clear that "from the standpoint of Japanese security, maintaining deterrence and reducing the burden on local communities, the proposed plan to relocate the aircraft carrier wing to Iwakuni must be implemented." Naoki Kumagai, Principal Deputy Director of the Status of Forces Division at MOFA, stressed that Chief Cabinet Secretary Abe has a "firm stance" on the issue and has criticized the Iwakuni mayor for the referendum. He added that Abe intends to get "this thing done," the Iwakuni referendum "results are as expected" and "don't change a lot," and the "bilateral negotiations are unchanged." The press quoted CCS Abe as saying the Japanese government will reach final agreement with the U.S. on realignment "regardless of local opposition."

14. (SBU) On March 20, 2006, Iwakuni City will merge with six

towns and a village to form a larger city. Six of these municipalities have already given the Japanese government their general agreement to the realignment plan. Most observers interpret Mayor Ihara's referendum as a politically motivated act to gain votes in the upcoming mayoral election on April 23. We have heard that the Iwakuni City Assembly and the mayors and chairpersons of the seven surrounding towns/villages opposed Mayor Ihara holding the referendum. Yu Town Mayor Toshimitsu Makimoto was quoted in the media as saying that since surrounding municipalities agreed in general to the relocation plan and are in the process of negotiating financial support and noise reduction measures with the Japanese government, the Iwakuni referendum just prior to the town consolidation could cause difficulties in relations with the central government in the weeks ahead.

¶5. (SBU) Iwakuni Mayor Katsusuke Ihara has publicly vowed to demand the Japanese government scrap the plan to relocate the aircraft carrier wing to Iwakuni if the majority vote opposed it. In addition, he has indicated that he supports the current base arrangement, and will oppose the proposed transfer of Japan Self-Defense Forces currently stationed at Iwakuni to Atsugi.

¶6. (C) Comment. Despite media speculation that the Iwakuni City referendum could spur other local governments to hold referendums on ATARA agreements, senior Japanese officials in Tokyo have made it clear in the press that the bilateral agreements reached in the October 22 Report will be implemented. Other mayors near Iwakuni are unlikely to hold referendums -- because if they are later "forced" to accept the realignment plans in the face of clear public opposition, they may feel obliged to resign. End Comment.
SCHIEFFER